NATHAN IMPATIENT

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by Alba Pratalia

Nathan had lost his patience. Not metaphorically. Literally. It had been a sturdy little pouch, leather, zipper half-busted, stuffed with all his remaining fucks to give. He'd last seen it, he thought, during a particularly long wait at the DMV when he needed to unzip it and hand over a spare fuck to avoid strangling the man behind the counter. After that? Gone.

He searched everywhere.

- Between sofa cushions (only found coins and one fossilized Cheeto).
- Inside the fridge ("because sometimes I put the wine opener there, why not patience too?").
- The sock drawer (no patience, only socks that had divorced each other years ago).

Nothing.

And now, without that pouch, Nathan had zero fucks to give. Not even a counterfeit one, not even a borrowed one. People came asking:

- Neighbor: “Could you lower the music?”
- Nathan: “Can’t. Zero fucks available. Out of stock.”
- Friend: “Don’t you care what they think of you?”
- Nathan: “Do you see a fuck? No? Exactly.”

Even the telemarketer on the phone paused when Nathan explained:
“Sir, we’re offering a special—”
“Stop. I literally can’t. I’ve lost my patience, which contained my fucks, which means you’re screaming into a vacuum.”

At first, freedom tasted sweet. No patience meant no waiting in lines, no enduring small talk, no pretending to like other people’s babies. He just walked away. Done.

But soon, the absence became… unsettling. There were moments when a tiny fuck might have been handy—like when his cat coughed up something that looked like a cursed relic from Pompeii, or when the coffee machine hissed and dribbled tar instead of espresso. Normally, he'd have dipped into the pouch and pulled out a small, practical fuck. Now? Nothing.

So Nathan resolved to find it. He called everyone he'd met in the last week. "Hey, did I leave my patience at your place? It's a small pouch. Brown. Worn. Contains all my fucks to give."

Most people hung up.
One person said, "Check under the bed."
Another said, "You never had patience to begin with."

But then a strange thought: what if someone had stolen it? Some shadowy figure now running around town, distributing Nathan's fucks recklessly, giving them to strangers like candy:

- “Here, I care about your band.”
- “Yes, I’d love to hear about your crypto start-up.”
- “Of course I’ll wait in line politely.”

Nathan shuddered. That was worse than losing it.

Nathan needed a mount. Not a noble steed—he’d tried hailing one and got three surge prices and a Prius—but a creature that could be bullied into the sky without complaining about union rules or gravity. Enter the thing he built from crimes: an abused delivery drone he’d “found,” an e-bike frame zip-tied on top, and a plastic lawn chair bolted where dignity should go. He christened it HippoGrift, because it would carry him and probably defraud someone on the way.

He fed it power banks like communion wafers. Lights flickered. The propellers coughed the way old men cough at funerals. He taped a cracked phone to the handlebars as a dashboard: altitude app, wind app, playlist labeled “Ascending Against My Better

Judgment." The safety kit: duct tape, a bungee cord, and a Sharpie to label his corpse.

"Test flight," he said, and HippoGrift shuddered up from the tenth-floor rooftop as if embarrassed to be seen. Pigeons scattered, registering legal complaints in coo. Nathan leaned forward and the contraption obeyed the way a cat obeys: by doing a similar thing for its own reasons. They skimmed the air above the city's sunburnt tar, past vent stacks breathing out ramen and printer ink.

Below, the streets sulked. Lines of cars aimed for tomorrow and missed. Apartment windows blinked their aquarium blues. Someone on a balcony filmed him. "Subscribe," Nathan yelled, because shame is dead.

The wind slapped his cheeks into a Renaissance painting of a disappointed father. HippoGrift pitched, caught itself, pitched again. "Don't die," he told it. "I'm out of patience for that." The machine

answered with an electrical whine—either agreement or a tiny scream.

A flock of drones joined formation like mean gulls: retail boxes, takeout soups, toothpaste for people who panic-bought nothing but flour in 2020 and haven't recovered. One delivery unit tried to overtake; Nathan gave it the finger with the ceremony of a knight presenting a lance. It veered off, perhaps offended, perhaps because it saw the zip ties and decided to respect family.

They cleared the interference of skyscrapers and rode a vein of smooth air. For twenty seconds Nathan felt the obscene luxury of stability. The city shrank to a board game where the rules were “Lose Money” and “Be Late.” With the rooftop horizon fading, the sky widened into an impolite amount of possibility. He tasted metal and childhood.

HippoGrift beeped a low-battery warning with the cheerfulness of a hospice nurse. Nathan slapped the side panel like that would invent more electrons.

“We just have to reach the on-ramp,” he said. He wasn’t sure what the on-ramp to the Moon looked like, but he trusted that if Earth can have outlet malls in deserts, the universe can have a service road to the impossible.

They skimmed past a billboard that said CONTROL YOUR BREATH, CONTROL YOUR LIFE, which felt like advice from someone who’s never choked on a pistachio. A thermal updraft grabbed them; HippoGrift climbed with the reluctant pride of a C-student nailing a presentation. Nathan whooped. It came out like a cough.

At cloud-height, the city went mute, sound stitched into cotton. He could hear the thin complaint of plastic under stress, the faint click of his own jaw. For a second, he reached for the pouch at his chest and grabbed only zipper memory. A clean pain. Good. He needed the ache to point the way.

The sky darkened from cheerful to surgical. Above them: the pale coin he was after, laminated in indifference. Between here and there: air, physics, and an application form he had not filed. Fine. Bureaucracy is merely religion with better fonts.

A blinking cursor appeared on the cracked phone: FIRMWARE UPDATE AVAILABLE. "Not today," he said, and hit LATER with the decisiveness of a man refusing destiny's pop-up ads.

HippoGrift bucked as a crosswind slapped them sideways. Nathan leaned into the yawn of empty space, legs braced, lawn chair groaning, zip ties singing their tight little hymn. Below, a jet drew a contrail like chalk across a blackboard. Above, the Moon pretended not to notice him.

He grinned, feral. "Look at me, you alabaster lost-and-found. I'm coming to repossess what's mine."

The drone beeped again—battery flirting with zero, ambition flirting with homicide. Nathan eyed the

distant speck that marked the rumored on-ramp: a maintenance hatch in the sky, if you believed in metaphors and poor engineering. He believed in both. He thumbed the throttle, accepted the new wobble, and let the city fall away like an excuse.

Nathan skimmed the last threads of breathable air the way a broke student scrapes peanut butter from the jar—nothing left but fumes and stubbornness. HippoGrift juddered, tilted, farted an electrical hiccup that smelled like fried optimism. Then, impossibly, there it was: a floating iron door, painted OSHA yellow, hovering at forty thousand feet like a punchline nobody laughed at.

Across it, a flickering sign: MAINTENANCE — COSMOS. DO NOT ENTER. Which of course meant "Enter if you've lost something important enough."

Nathan throttled down, circled once like a drunk hawk, and landed the contraption on a grated platform barely wider than a dumpster lid.

HippoGrift whined its death rattle, propellers folding in like the wings of a moth that's finally given up on porch lights. Nathan patted its handlebars. "Don't worry. If I come back, I'll file for your pension."

He faced the door. No knob, no keypad—just a buzz of static and a faint smell of burned toast. He knocked. Because sometimes the universe is old-fashioned.

It opened.

Inside: corridors of peeling linoleum, fluorescent tubes strobing in Morse code for "abandon hope." Filing cabinets stretched into infinity, humming like refrigerators full of secrets. A vending machine blinked: SOUL SNACKS 2.50. He didn't have change, and anyway, souls give him indigestion.

From the gloom waddled a figure: hoodie, sandals with socks, beard that looked compiled from various programming languages. **Prestige John.** Systems

Admin of the Spheres. Patron saint of unplugging it and plugging it back in.

“You the guy who misplaced his patience?” John asked, voice flat as dial tone.

“That’s me.”

John sniffed. “Happens all the time. Patience is volatile memory. Power flickers, poof, gone. If you want yours back, you’ll need an escalation ticket.” He gestured at the endless cabinets. “Form 27B/6.”

Nathan sighed. “Of course.”

John smirked, pulling a form from his hoodie like a magician producing a rabbit that’s already dead. “Lucky day. I pre-filled your complaint: *‘Subject reports absence of pouch containing all remaining fucks to give, possibly last seen near DMV hellscape.’*”

“Sounds accurate.”

“Signature here.”

Nathan signed with the flourish of a man forging checks. The paper dissolved into binary dust.

John tapped a badge that hung from his neck: UNLIMITED ACCESS. “Alright. I’ll open the fire escape. But listen, groundling—when you’re up there, keep perspective. Moon’s where all lost things go, but also where lost people go looking for them. You might find your pouch. You might find every half-baked version of yourself that thought it could’ve done better. Don’t linger.”

“Perspective,” Nathan muttered. “Copy.”

John opened a hatch. Heat blasted through—engine roar, ozone, the thrum of a celestial Uber idling at the curb of reality. A sign on the hatch read: ELIJAH’S CHARIOT — CLEANING FEE $75 IF YOU PUKED.

Nathan grinned despite the ozone in his throat. “Guess this is my ride.”

John shrugged. “Moon or bust. Strap in. Don’t touch the radio; it only plays sermons.”

Nathan climbed in, pouchless chest aching like phantom limb, hands gripping the armrests of an interstellar taxi. The door clanged shut, hydraulics screamed, and the chariot lurched.

The Earth dropped away, a pale screensaver. Nathan’s stomach tried to renegotiate its contract. Too late.

He shouted into the void: “Hold my calls. I’m going to the lost-and-found.”

The chariot cracked the atmosphere, and Nathan—fool, knight, quartermaster of zero fucks—hurtled toward the Moon.

The chariot clawed up through the bruised sky, rattling like an elevator built by interns. Lightning

stitched across the windows, then peeled away to reveal a blackness too thick to be called night. Stars glittered like dropped thumbtacks, unhelpful and everywhere.

Nathan's seatbelt—a rope with a "BEST DAD" buckle John had scavenged—dug into his ribs. "Any in-flight service?" he yelled over the engines.

The dashboard flickered: NO FOOD, NO DRINK, NO MERCY.

Figures.

Minutes, hours—time became something rubbery. His phone lost signal, then gained signal from a roaming provider called COSMIC ROAM LTD. They offered him unlimited data for $9,999 a minute. He declined. The screen sulked into airplane mode.

The chariot shuddered as if crossing a pothole the size of Nebraska. Out the porthole, satellites

tumbled like discarded hubcaps, some blinking weakly, some stripped bare. A piece of space junk spun past—an old selfie stick still clutching a cracked iPhone, the last frame of a tourist grin forever frozen against orbital vacuum.

Nathan muttered, “Moon or bust.”

The engines dropped to a whisper. Silence swelled—an absurd, heavy silence, the kind that makes you hear your own blood like a distant drummer warming up.

Then, ahead: the horizon tilted silver.

The Moon.

Not a romantic coin in a velvet sky, but a warehouse bulb left on in the universe’s garage. The closer they drew, the more details resolved: shipping containers stacked like dominoes, billboards advertising LOST ITEMS OUTLET: 70% OFF YOUR DIGNITY. A conveyor belt rattled, ferrying debris into hangars:

half-finished novels, expired coupons, promises scribbled on cocktail napkins.

The chariot groaned into descent mode. A synthetic voice rasped from the speaker: WELCOME, TRAVELER. THIS IS THE MOON. ALL THINGS LOST, MISPLACED, FORGOTTEN, OR REGRETTED ARE CATALOGUED HERE. HAVE A NICE DAY.

The landing gear crunched on pumice dust. The hatch unsealed with a hiss. Nathan stepped out, boots sinking into powder that smelled faintly of burnt plastic and nostalgia.

A forklift beeped past, carrying a pallet of "Socks Separated in the Dryer, 1950–2024." Another rolled by with crates labeled "Youthful Optimism (Perishable)."

The place stretched forever: a logistics park for everything the living had misplaced.

Nathan tightened his coat, scanned the horizon, and whispered, “Alright, patience… where the hell are you hiding?”

Nathan followed the squeal of the forklifts deeper into the lunar yard. Everything had a label, stamped in bold bureaucratic font:

- Abandoned Diet Plans (Frozen Section).
- Phone Chargers Left in Hotels.
- Umbrellas Misplaced in Subways.
- Political Promises (Highly Flammable).

He passed a warehouse stacked floor to ceiling with half-written love letters—“Dear… [DRAFT SAVED].” The air tasted like stale perfume and cold coffee. He coughed it out.

A neon arrow buzzed overhead: **“NEW ARRIVALS — CHECK IN HERE.”** He followed it into a cavernous hangar, where a single desk sat under a swinging bulb. Behind it slouched the **Clerk of Mislaid Things.**

The Clerk looked like someone who'd been left behind themselves: pale skin the texture of receipt paper, one eye magnified through a monocle that displayed an eternal loading bar. He wore a badge that read *ARCHIVIST, LEVEL 7, DO NOT TAP ON GLASS.*

Without looking up, the Clerk said, "State your loss."

Nathan cleared his throat. "Patience. Brown leather pouch. Half-busted zipper. Inside: every fuck I had left to give."

The Clerk sighed, typing with skeletal fingers on a keyboard older than sin. The keys clacked like coffin lids. "Patience… patience… pouch, brown… ah." He squinted at the screen. "Filed under *Commodities,* cross-listed with *Time Wasted* and *Emotional Bankruptcies.* Aisle 7, Subsection B, Shelf 42."

Nathan leaned forward. "So it's here?"

“All things are here,” the Clerk said. “The Moon holds what Earth misplaces. But be warned—what you take, you must carry. And sometimes, you’ll find more than you came for.”

The bulb swung wider, casting shadows that looked too eager.

Nathan nodded. “Aisle 7, Subsection B.”

The Clerk slid over a laminated map of the warehouse, edges curled from centuries of nervous hands. “Try not to cry,” he added.

Nathan tucked the map into his jacket, took one step toward the endless rows, and immediately felt the pull—like a zipper opening in his chest, whispering the way only memory does: *this way, this way, don’t look back.*

He grinned, cracked his knuckles, and muttered, “Lost and found, you son of a bitch. Let’s see if you’ve still got my patience on the shelf.”

The aisles rose like canyons, steel shelving stacked with humanity's dropped stitches. Each row hummed faintly, as though regret itself had an electrical current. Nathan's boots scuffed grey dust that smelled like pencil shavings and old church basements.

He passed **The Hall of Lost Causes** first. Glass jars lined the racks, glowing faintly: "New Year's Resolution, 2003," "Communism in Prague, 1968," "Band That Almost Made It Big (Garage Tapes)." Each jar fizzed with energy, tiny lightning bolts rattling inside. Nathan reached toward one labeled *"Get Dad to Say He's Proud of Me."* The jar sparked. He jerked his hand back. Too raw. He moved on.

Next, the aisle bent into a glowing cavern: **The Lake of Wasted Breath.** A sheet of mercury stretched to the horizon, rippling with voices. He leaned closer and caught fragments:

- "Actually, you're wrong because—"

- “As a parent, let me say—”
- “Listen to my podcast, it’s only three hours—”

Each word bubbled to the surface, then sank, never to touch an ear that cared. Nathan skipped a bolt he found on the ground across the surface. It bounced once, twice, then was swallowed by a monologue about cryptocurrency.

He laughed—sharp, involuntary. The sound echoed, came back sounding like someone else’s chuckle. For a moment, the Moon felt like it was in on the joke.

Beyond the lake, signs directed him deeper: MARKET OF MISPLACED FAME → and FREEZER OF PROMISES ←. His map agreed: Patience, Shelf 42, was past them both.

He walked into the Market. It was chaos: a bazaar lit by broken neon, stalls piled high with ignored brilliance. A man in a velvet jacket hawked unsold

novels: “A masterpiece reviewed by no one! Only three unread copies left!” Another merchant waved an unloved mixtape: “Dropped the same day as Beyoncé’s surprise album—ruined forever!” The air buzzed with desperation and moth-eaten applause.

Nathan shook his head. His patience wouldn’t be here. Fame had never been its currency.

He pushed on, the map crinkling in his pocket, chest tight as though the pouch already tugged him closer. Each step forward, he felt the ache sharpen—not unpleasant, but surgical, pulling him like a compass.

Finally, a metal sign swung overhead:
COMMODITIES, AISLE 7.

He turned.

Somewhere down this aisle, between crates of wasted hours and misfiled intentions, was his

pouch—brown leather, busted zipper, the small sack of fucks he had once rationed like wartime sugar.

He swallowed hard. The ache in his chest deepened.

It was here. He could feel it.

Aisle 7 was less an aisle and more a cathedral of shelving—steel beams rising so high they blurred into lunar haze. The signs were plain, bureaucratic, devastating:

- Misplaced Hours (Streaming, Scrolling, Snoozing).
- Abandoned Friendships (Unreplied Texts).
- Patience (Subsection B).

That last one glowed faintly, as if mocking him.

He walked. Each shelf exhaled temptation. First came Trivial Delays Misfiled as Catastrophes. Glass vials held scenes of Nathan cursing red lights, buffering wheels, microwaves taking "too long." Each vial hummed with the stupid heat of

overreaction. He winced. “Yep. Wasted all those,” he muttered, and kept moving.

Next: **Borrowed Patience.** Rows of jars filled with fake calm—pharmaceutical gloss, spiritual bypassing, self-help mantras printed in cursive fonts. They smelled like lavender and denial. One jar whispered: *“Everything happens for a reason.”* He nearly smashed it on principle.

Further in: **Counterfeit Fucks.** They glimmered like casino chips—flashy, worthless. Each one was stamped with things he pretended to care about but didn’t: workplace gossip, influencer feuds, sports teams he only liked when drunk. He shoved past, the ache in his chest pulling harder now.

At last, the sign: **Subsection B, Shelf 42.**

The shelf sagged under pouches identical to his—brown leather, frayed zippers, each tagged with an owner’s name. They pulsed softly, like sleeping animals. Nathan scanned them:

- *Patience, Maria K.*
- *Patience, Abdul R.*
- *Patience, 47th President (Pending).*

And then—

Patience, Nathan R.

There it was. Small. Worn. The zipper still sulking in its half-busted way.

He reached for it.

But something shifted behind him. A scraping. A cough not made by lungs. He turned.

Out of the shadows waddled the **Custodian of Patience.** A hunched figure with too many pockets, each bulging with stolen seconds and hoarded calm. Its eyes were clocks, both stuck at five minutes to midnight. Its voice was static:

“You sure you want it back? You were freer without it. No waiting. No caring. No fucks to ration. Just pure, feral immediacy.”

The pouch tugged at him like a heartbeat.

Nathan squared his shoulders. “Yeah. But I’m not here for freedom. I’m here for balance.”

The Custodian smiled—a slow, gear-grinding smile. “Then let’s see if you deserve it.”

The aisle lights dimmed. The shelves trembled. Jars began to rattle, glowing brighter, like an audience waiting for a fight.

Nathan flexed his fingers, eyes on the pouch.

“Fine,” he said. “Test me.”

The Custodian stretched taller, its coat of pockets rustling like restless curtains. Each pocket unzipped itself with a slow metallic sigh. Out spilled not weapons, but **delays**:

- A line at the post office that looped back on itself like a Möbius strip.
- An endless phone tree: *"Press 1 for more options. Press 2 to repeat this message."*
- A frozen progress bar at 99%, smug as a cat.

Nathan braced. This wasn't a fight of fists—it was a gauntlet of waiting.

The Custodian's first move: the post office line uncoiled and wrapped around Nathan's ankles. Ghostly figures muttered about stamps, passports, and "the right form, but the wrong ink color." He kicked, but the line pulled tighter. His instinct screamed: *tear free, rage, spend a fuck.*

Instead, he inhaled, exhaled, and said, "Nope. Not my circus. Not my envelope." The line slackened, dissolving into dust.

Second move: the phone tree buzzed to life, speakers dangling like wasps around his head. Each menu option looped back to itself. "For English,

press 1. For frustration, press 2. For despair, stay on the line." His thumb twitched—he wanted to hang up, smash the device. But he remembered John's words: *patience isn't martyrdom, it's timing.*

Nathan pulled the rope-belt from his waist, looped it around the speaker like a lasso, and yanked. The entire tree collapsed, shattering into busy tones.

The Custodian hissed. "Impressive. But endure this."

The frozen progress bar materialized before him, projected into the air. It hung at 99%, pixelated, unmoving. Time itself paused, the warehouse lights locked in a flicker. Every instinct screamed at Nathan to scream back.

Instead, he smirked. "Classic trick. But I've lived through Windows 95. I can outwait this."

He sat cross-legged on the lunar dust. Folded his arms. Hummed Sinatra under his breath. Seconds

stretched, then snapped. With a shudder, the bar ticked over to 100%. The illusion shattered into confetti that smelled faintly of dial-up.

The Custodian reeled, pockets collapsing inward, clocks in its skull spinning. “You… held. You resisted.”

“Damn right,” Nathan said, rising. “Now cough up my pouch.”

The Custodian bowed, gear-smile flickering, and stepped aside. “Take it, Nathan R. But remember: every patience reclaimed is a patience tested. Spend wisely.”

Nathan reached for the shelf. Fingers closed around the worn leather, the half-busted zipper. Warmth flooded his chest where the ache had been. He pulled it close, unzipped it just enough to peek inside—rows of carefully rolled fucks, intact.

He zipped it shut. “Alright, Moon. You can keep the umbrellas and the mixtapes. But this? This comes home.”

The warehouse groaned as if disappointed. Somewhere far above, the pale surface shone brighter.

Nathan slung the pouch across his chest and turned toward the exit.

Nathan didn’t bolt for the exit right away. The pouch thumped against his ribs with every step, insistent, like a pet that hadn’t been fed in years. But the Moon wasn’t done showing off. The aisles tugged at him, dragging him sideways into detours.

First: **The Freezer of Promises.** Stainless steel doors hissed open as he passed. Inside, rows of shrink-wrapped commitments lay frosted over:

- “We’ll always stay in touch.”
- “Next year will be different.”

- “I’ll call you back.”

Each frozen slab glimmered with false warmth. Nathan brushed frost off one and read: *“Patience, Nathan R.: I’ll never lose you.”* His stomach knotted. He slammed the door shut and kept walking.

Next came **The Gallery of Self-Respect.** Mannequins stood in glass cases, modeling discarded boundaries like haute couture. One wore a sequined jacket stitched from *Times I Said Yes When I Meant No.* Another carried a handbag labeled *Staying Quiet So They’d Like Me.* Nathan pressed his forehead to the glass, muttered, “Never again,” and the nearest mannequin gave him a wink—whether out of solidarity or mockery, he couldn’t tell.

Deeper still: **The Room of Bottled Wits.** Shelves of bell jars fizzed with light, each labeled with the name of someone who had “lost their mind.” The air smelled citrusy, sharp. He spotted one jar glowing

particularly bright: *"Perspective, Nathan R."* The seal had cracked. Maybe he'd inhaled some already, back in Aisle 7. He lifted it, uncorked, took a breath. The world sharpened. The warehouse's size shrank from infinity to merely colossal. He put the jar back. Perspective borrowed was enough; perspective hoarded was arrogance.

At the far end, a final corridor opened: **Departures.** A luminous sign blinked, pointing toward a hatch marked with peeling paint: *TO EARTH — RETURNS, REFUNDS, RE-ENTRIES.* Forklifts rumbled, carrying crates of broken resolutions and unreplied love letters toward shipping containers labeled *STORAGE UNTIL APOCALYPSE.*

Nathan adjusted the pouch strap. Heavy. Comforting. Dangerous. He patted it, whispering, "Stay zipped until I need you."

From somewhere in the shelves, the Custodian's static voice drifted after him:
"Remember—patience isn't infinite. You earned it

back. Don't waste it on lines, trolls, or machines that lie about 99%."

Nathan raised a hand in acknowledgment without turning.

Ahead, the hatch hissed open. Ozone spilled out, carrying the faint hum of engines revving for descent.

The ride home waited.

The hatch opened onto a boarding ramp that rattled in the vacuum, leading to Elijah's chariot still idling like a taxi that had been over-metering since Genesis. Nathan climbed in, pouch strapped tight. The door slammed. A voice purred from the speaker:

"Re-entry protocol: turbulence, tempests, and a mandatory survey about your trip. Estimated time: eternity."

The chariot lurched away from the Moon, and immediately the trials began.

First came a **storm of Notifications.** Push alerts swarmed the hull, pelting against the glass like hailstones: *"Breaking News!" "Limited Time Offer!" "Your ex has updated their profile!"* Each one detonated with a pop of dopamine static. The temptation to swipe, to check, to waste—the pouch quivered at his ribs. Nathan clenched his jaw, muttered, "Not today," and the storm fell silent, dispersing into harmless emojis.

Then: a **torrent of Hot Takes.** Columns of incandescent opinion raged across the void—flaming threads, political rants, thinkpieces about pineapple on pizza. The flames licked the windows, words screaming to be answered. Nathan inhaled, zipped the pouch tighter, and stared straight ahead. The fire found no fuel, and guttered into darkness.

The chariot bucked as it entered the **Tempest of Customer Service.** Automated voices rose from the

black clouds: *"Your call is very important to us."* Lightning bolts flashed in the shape of hold music. Thunder crashed in triplicate: *"Estimated wait time… forever."* His ears rang with elevator jazz. Nathan nearly screamed—but then he laughed, shook his head, and let silence ride shotgun. The storm, offended, dissolved into static snow.

Next: the **Squall of Small Talk.** Wisps of strangers materialized in the cabin, each armed with weather comments and questions about weekend plans. Their voices droned, seeking his patience like parasites. He reached into the pouch, pulled out one tiny, expendable fuck, and flicked it at them like a coin. It scattered the phantoms instantly. "That one was worth it," he muttered.

At last, the chariot screamed into the atmosphere. Heat roared, flames licked the hull, the Earth swelled beneath like an open mouth. The pouch tugged hard at his chest—as if gravity itself wanted it back—but Nathan held on.

Through the fire, through the rattle, through the last tests of nerves, he rode the fall with patience zipped safe, fucks rationed. The storm broke, the roar eased, and land appeared below: rooftops, streets, the ridiculous mess of human life waiting for him.

The chariot's wheels slammed onto a mall rooftop, bouncing once, then rolling to a halt between a Taco Bell and a vape shop.

Nathan unbuckled. The world was still absurd, still hungry, still waiting. But now, for the first time in a long time, he had the means to face it: a pouch full of patience, zipped shut, and his own refusal to waste it where it didn't count.

Nathan clambered down from the chariot, boots scraping tar and pigeon shit, pouch thumping against his ribs. Earth greeted him exactly as he'd left it: impatient, fluorescent, and chewing gum too loudly.

So, naturally, his first stop was back where this all began—the DMV.

Inside, the line still coiled like a python digesting bureaucracy. Harpies in polo shirts shrieked over printer jams. The same buzzing lights, the same scent of toner and despair. Only difference now: Nathan had the pouch.

He felt its weight tugging when he spotted the poor bastard at the counter. A young guy, glassy-eyed, papers trembling in his hands. The clerk was devouring him alive, talons tapping on the desk. "Wrong form. Wrong ink. Wrong dimension of time and space. NEXT!"

The kid didn't move. His face was collapsing in on itself—like he'd just lost more than a form. Maybe his wits.

Nathan knew the scene. Ariosto had Astolfo uncork Orlando's reason here. He didn't need jars. He had the pouch.

He walked up, slow and deliberate. “Hold my place,” he muttered to no one, and unzipped.

Inside, fucks shimmered like ration cards. He reached past the daily-use ones, past the medium-sized “handle traffic jam” ones, and pulled out something rarer: **Perspective.** It glowed faintly, like a cigarette in the dark.

He held it to the kid’s chest. “Breathe.”

The kid inhaled. His shoulders loosened. His eyes blinked like someone switching channels back to themselves. He exhaled, a shaky laugh, then turned to the clerk. “You know what? Fine. Wrong form? Give me the right one. I’ll fill it again.”

The clerk sputtered, off-script. The whole queue shifted—people whispering, startled. The Harpies shrank back.

Nathan zipped the pouch shut. “Don’t thank me,” he told the kid. “Just pay it forward. And don’t waste it on trolls or hold music.”

The kid nodded, clutching his papers like armor.

Nathan stepped back, folded his arms, and felt the pouch hum against him. The DMV was still hell. But hell couldn’t take his patience anymore.

Outside, the sun was setting. Neon flickered alive. The world kept grinding, absurd and endless. Nathan grinned. He had patience again—not infinite, but enough.

And for the first time in longer than he could remember, he gave exactly one fuck about what came next.

At home, Nathan cleared a space in the liquor cabinet—bottom shelf, far back, the place where only cobwebs and bad decisions live. The pouch sat

heavy in his hand, zipper sulking, leather warm from the trip. He stared at it a long while.

Patience, he decided, should never be left lying around. Too easy to lose again. Too tempting to waste. So he shoved it behind the gin, under the emergency tequila, wedged between a bottle of dusty vermouth and a whiskey he swore he'd save for "a special occasion" that never quite arrived.

Perfect. If he ever needed patience, he'd have to go through booze to get it. Which was exactly right—because patience, like whiskey, should be measured, poured carefully, sipped in small doses, and chased with something stronger when it runs out.

He shut the cabinet, poured himself a shot, and toasted the silence. "To patience," he said. "May I always have just enough—and may I never find it without help."

The pouch glowed faintly in the dark, hidden, unreachable unless earned through ritual. And

Nathan, lighter now, leaned back in his chair, glass in hand, perfectly content to wait for the next absurdity.

Because patience, after all, was safest where it belonged: at the bottom of the liquor cabinet, available only by way of booze—just as God, the Moon, and every DMV clerk surely intended.